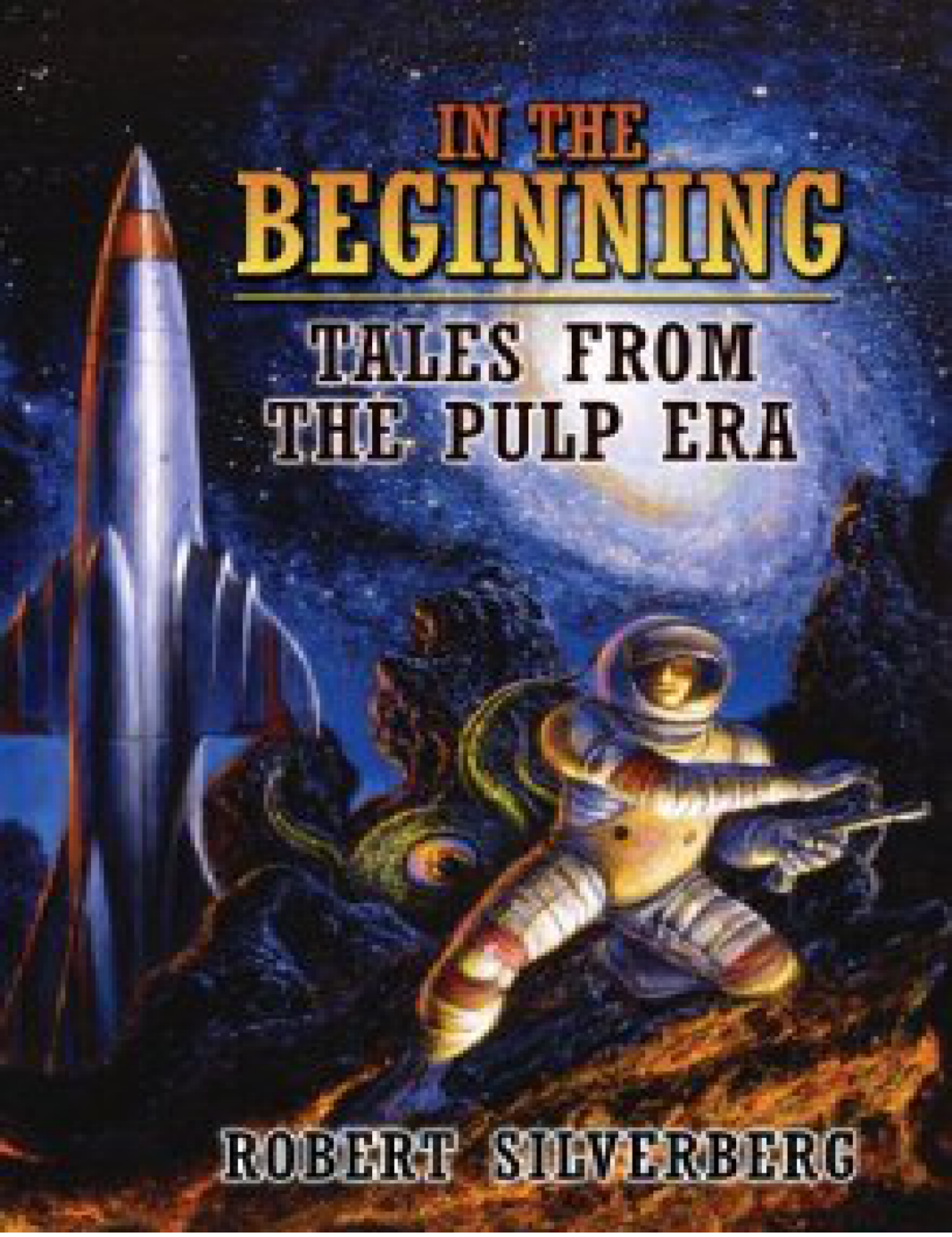
IN THE
BEGINNING
TALES FROM
THE PULP ERA
ROBERT SILVERBERG

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- The Insidious Invaders
  -

The Insidious Invaders
by Robert Silverberg

After the incident of the disposal unit, there was no longer any room for reasonable doubt: something peculiar had happened to Ted Kennedy while he was away at space. Marge and Dave Spalding, Kennedy's sister and brother-in-law, had been watching him all evening, growing more and more puzzled by certain strangenesses in Kennedy's behavior. But this was the strangest of all.

He had been wandering around the room, examining the new gadgets that now were standard household fare. They were strange to him, after all the years he had been away. He had been standing by the wall disposal unit, which efficiently and instantly converted matter to energy, and he had suddenly, curiously, stuck his hand near the open entryway to the unit, saying, "This house is so full of new gadgets that I hardly know what anything does. This thing over here —"

"Watch out, Ted!" Marge Spalding screamed in alarm. "Don't—"

She was too late. There was the brief crackling noise of the disposal unit functioning. And Kennedy had thrust his arm in up to the elbow!

"Ted!" Marge wailed. "Your arm—!" She closed her eyes and felt hysterics starting.

But Kennedy said in the same calm, strange voice he had been using all evening, "My arm's all right, Marge. What's all the excitement about?"

"But—but that was the wall disposal unit," Marge muttered bewilderedly. "Anything you put in there gets converted to energy."

Kennedy held up an obviously intact arm and smiled, the way one might smile when talking to a child who misunderstands. "Look, Marge. I pulled my arm back in time. See?"

Dave Spalding, who had been watching the scene with growing confusion, said, "But we heard the sound, Ted. When you activate the unit, it crackles like that."

"And I saw you stick your hand in there all the way up to the elbow, Ted!" Marge insisted.

Kennedy chuckled. "You're both imagining things. All I did was toss a piece of candy in to see what would happen. My hand didn't go anywhere near the field."

"But I saw your hand go in, Ted," Marge repeated, getting more stubborn now that the evidence of her own eyes was being contradicted. "And yet—your hand's all right. I don't understand."

"I tell you my hand didn't come anywhere near it, Marge," her brother said forcefully. "Let's not discuss it any more, shall we?"

* * *

That was the strangest part of the evening so far, Marge thought. But Ted had been behaving peculiarly ever since he came in.

He had been late, first of all. That was unlike the old Ted. He had been expected about nine, but he was long overdue. Dave Spalding had been pacing the apartment with increasing irritation.

"It's past ten, Marge. When's this spaceman brother of yours getting here? Three in the morning?"

"Oh, Dave, don't start getting upset about it," Marge had said soothingly. "So he's a little late! Don't forget it's five years since he was last on Earth."

"Five years or no five years. His ship landed at half past seven. It doesn't take three hours to get here from the spaceport. I thought you said he was so punctual, Marge."

"He used to be. Oh, I don't know—maybe there was some routine he had to go through, before they would let him leave the spaceport. I understand there's a comprehensive medical examination for all returning spacemen—"

"That's all we need," Spalding snorted. "Some weird disease he picked up on Alpha Centauri Five, or—"

"You know they wouldn't let him near civilians if he had any such diseases."

"Well, all I want to say is that if he doesn't show his face here by eleven, I'm going to go upstairs and go to bed," Spalding grumbled. "Spaceman or no spaceman. I need my sleep."

The doorbell chimed.

Marge cried, "There he is now, Dave! I knew he'd get here any minute! Be nice to him, Dave. He *is* my brother, after all. And I haven't seen him since '89."

"Okay," Spalding said. "Don't worry about me. I'll be polite."

He walked to the door, hesitated before it a moment, and opened it. A tall young man in spaceman's uniform stood in the hallway, smiling. There was something about the quality of that smile that made Dave Spalding instantly uncomfortable. As if—as if it were not the smile of a human being, but of some alien *thing* wearing the mask of humanity.

"Hello, there," Spalding said with forced geniality. "Come right

on in. My name's Dave Spalding."

"Thanks. I appreciate this, Dave." Kennedy stepped in. His voice, when he had spoken, had a curious otherwordly undertone.

Spalding closed the door.

Marge ran toward her brother, throwing her arms around him. "Ted! Oh, Ted!"

"Hello, Sis!" Kennedy replied. He thrust her gently away from him. "Stand back—let me look at you." He whistled appreciatively. "Sister's a big girl, now, isn't she?"

"I'm almost 24," Marge said "I married Dave three years ago."

"You haven't changed much in the five years I've been away," Kennedy said. "The same red hair—that dimple—the freckles on your nose—"

"Was there much red tape before you could leave the spaceport?" Spalding broke in brusquely.

"Just the medical exam," Kennedy said. "They gave me a quick look to make sure I wasn't carrying the plague. I was cleared through around quarter past eight."

Spalding gave an unfunny chuckle. "You must have stopped off for a little nip or two before coming here, eh?"

"Nip? No. I came straight here from the spaceport."

"But it only takes half an hour by rocket-tube," Marge said, frowning.

Kennedy shook his head. "No one said anything to me about a rocket-tube. I took the subway."

"The subway!" Spalding laughed. "Oh, really now—the subway, all the way out here! No wonder it took you so long!"

Marge said, "Dave, the rocket-tube line has only been in operation three and a half years. That's why Ted didn't use it. He didn't know it existed!"

"The world changes more than you think in five years. The new-model autos that drive themselves—the three-D video—the robots—those things were still brand new and strange, when I was last on Earth. And now they're commonplace. To everyone except me."

Marge stared keenly at her brother. When he spoke like that, he seemed real. But there was something unconvincing about him, all the same.

What am I thinking? she wondered. *Am I nuts? He's my brother, that's all. He looks and acts a little different because he's been away so long.*

Dave said, "Come on into the living room, Ted. You probably want to rest up. I'll give you a drink—put a little music on—"

"And you can tell us all about your five years in space," Marge said.

Ted smiled. “Good ideas, all of them.”

They adjourned to the living room, where Kennedy made himself comfortable in an armchair. Spalding turned the phonograph on. Chamber music welled out into the room. Kennedy nodded his head in time with the music.

“Mozart,” he said. “You miss him, out in space.”

“Can I dial you a drink?” Spalding asked.

“Scotch, thanks. I take it neat.”

“Same old Ted!” Marge said, reassuring herself. “Still likes the same music, still drinks then same kind of drink.”

“It’s only been five years, you know. I haven’t been away forever.”

Marge nodded. But, still, the nagging feeling persisted that there was something different about Ted that a mere absence of five years could not account for.

“Can you tell us where you’ve been?” Spalding asked. “Or is that classified?”

“Well, some of it is,” Kennedy said. “But I covered a lot of ground. You ought to see the night sky on Deneb Nine, Marge—five hundred little moons up there, like whirling knives in the darkness. And the 17th planet of the Vega system—two billion miles from its sun, and yet there’s that great blazing light in the sky, so bright we had to wear special eye-lenses.”

“Join the Space Force and see the galaxy!,” Marge exclaimed. “That’s what the recruiting commercials say. I guess it’s really true.”

Kennedy sipped his drink slowly. “It was good of you two to put me up here while I was on ground leave. It’s no treat to come back to a world where you have no friends and just one living relative.”

“Oh, don’t mention it,” Spalding said. “Ah—how long did you say you’d be staying?”

“Three weeks, if it’s all right with you.”

“And then you have to go back to space for another five years?” Marge asked.

“That’s right. Survey trip, this time—around the galactic rim.”

“How exciting that must be!” Marge exclaimed.

“It’s just his job, after all,” Spalding said in offhand tones.

“But how much more exciting it must be to be a spaceman, than a —a *newspaperman,”* Marge said.

Kennedy turned to his brother-in-law. “Are you a newspaperman, Dave?”

“I work for one of the systemwide wire services.”

Kennedy shrugged. “Then you’ve got a job that keeps humming *all* the time. We spacemen spend three quarters of our time drifting through nowhere, between planets, playing solitaire and watching

corny old films and thinking about Earth."

He rose and began to prowl around the room, eyeing the mechanical implements. The Spaldings liked new gadgets, and the room had plenty of them—the automatic drink-mixer, the wall disposal unit, the light-dimmer, and half a dozen more.

"But when the waiting's over," Spalding pursued, "When you finally reach another sun and walk on alien soil—"

"Ah! Then it all becomes worthwhile." He yawned. "But you must excuse me. I've had a busy day aboard ship, and then getting out here on that subway—"

"Of course," Spalding said sympathetically. "Do you want me to show you to your room?"

"I'd appreciate that," Kennedy said.

Marge watched her brother carefully. Half the time he seemed so normal, and the rest—

"Hmm," Kennedy was saying. "This house is so full of new gadgets that I hardly know what anything does. This thing over here —"

That was when he put his hand into the disposal unit and withdrew it unharmed. Despite Kennedy's repeated insistence that his hand had not gone in, Marge was certain that she had seen it enter the field and be consumed. But there it was, whole. She frowned and shook her head.

Kennedy said, "Dave, would you show me to my room? I'm pretty worn out."

Her brother and her husband went upstairs together. Marge Kennedy sank limply into the enveloping depths of the sofa. "But I saw his hand go in," she muttered softly to herself. "I saw it!"

* * *

When her husband returned from the guest room, fifteen minutes later, Marge was still sitting on the sofa, staring off into nowhere—obscurely worried, and not even fully understanding *why* she was worried.

Spalding said, "Well, he's all moved in upstairs in the guest room. He seems pleased with the layout. Suppose we turn in, now. Past eleven, isn't it?"

Marge shook her head. "Dave, I'm worried."

"About what? That business with the disposal unit." He laughed nervously. "It must have been just our imaginations that—"

"No." Marge locked her hands together. "I saw him clearly put his arm into the field. But when he took it out again the hand was whole. And there are other things that worry me, too."

"Like what?"

She struggled for words, wondering if she were being utterly silly even to start this sort of discussion. After a pause she said, "He's *different,* somehow, Dave."

"Different? Sure. Five years, and—"

"Not just the five years. That's part of it, maybe. But some things about a person just don't change, not even after five years. And he's changed. His voice isn't quite the same any more. There's something—well, weird—about the way he speaks now. And his eyes—that far-away look he has. He never had that before, either. Dave, he's *changed.* I'm afraid of him now!"

Spalding glowered scornfully at his wife. "Afraid of your own brother?"

She felt her face going hot. "I'm afraid that—that he isn't my brother any more."

"What!"

Marge fought to keep the hysterical sobs back. "Dave, I don't know what I'm saying, I guess. But I feel strange, with him upstairs. As if—as if something very dangerous has entered our house ."

"Don't be idiotic, Marge!"

"I tell you I'm worried."

"What do you want me to do about it?" he burst out impatiently. "Go upstairs and ask him if he's a monster in disguise? Look, Marge, he's your brother and you invited him here."

"I didn't know he'd be—like this."

"And what, am I supposed to do about the way he is? This thing is all in your imagination, anyway. For the umpteenth time, are you going to come to bed, or—"

"Didn't you see him stick his hand into the disposal field?" Marge demanded.

"No, I didn't!" Spalding snapped angrily.

Marge's eyes widened in surprise and anger. "But you said—Dave, you're just making that up! You saw it as clear as I did."

Exasperated, Spalding let out his breath slowly. "Do you want me to go upstairs and ask him to leave? If you think he's dangerous, he can spend his furlough in some hotel."

"No—we can't do that—"

"Then leave me alone. Stop this crazy talk and let's go to bed."

"Would you do one thing for me?" Marge asked.

"What is it?"

"Go upstairs—to *his* room. He probably isn't asleep yet, but

maybe he's getting undressed. Try to get a look at him."

"Huh?"

"My brother had a scar on his chest—about five inches long, starting from the left collarbone and running down diagonally. He got it when we were kids. See if—if the man upstairs has that scar too."

"Now, look, Marge," Spalding said irritatedly, "you already admitted that he liked the same drinks and the same music he always did, so why—"

"Will you go upstairs and look? You could tell him you just stopped in before you went to bed, to see if he was comfortable."

"This is ridiculous, Marge. Spying on your own brother to see if he's actually a Thing from Outer Space—it's absurd!"

"I'll feel happier if you go up. Will you?"

Spalding shrugged resignedly. He would get no peace this night until he did, and he knew it. "Oh—all right. If it'll stop you from worrying." He started toward the staircase. "I'll go see if he's still awake. But if his light is out, I'm not going to bother him."

* * *

The light, however, was not out. Dave Spalding stood for a long moment in front of the guest room door, peering regretfully at the thin wisp of light streaming underneath the door, and finally knocked. He pushed the door open and said apologetically, "I saw your light was still on, Ted, so I figured I'd stop in and—what the devil—" He stopped and gasped.

Kennedy said in a voice of cold, iron-hard menace, "Why do you enter my room without knocking?"

Spalding backpedaled on numb, watery legs. "Your face—you—it's—"

"My face is different?"

Whispering incredulously, Spalding said, "Why—you look like me, now! My face, that is. Not yours!"

"I'm simply practicing," Kennedy said in the same flat, metallic tone.

"Practicing?"

"Don't go away," Kennedy said quickly, as Spalding continued to back toward the hallway. "Come here, Dave. Right over here to me."

"What *are* you?" Spalding muttered. He felt a trickle of cold sweat run tinglingly down his back.

Kennedy chuckled. "What am I? I'm your brother-in-law, Dave."

"But your face—and your hand, before, in the disposal unit—"

"Yes. You *did* seem surprised. It was an error of mine, putting my hand in there. But I didn't know the consequences, or I'd have kept my hands away from it." He circled around, deftly putting himself between Spalding and the door. Paling, Spalding stood his ground, resisting the temptation to try to fight his way out. Kennedy went on, "I couldn't do things like this before I visited Altair VI, two years ago. Altair VI has a very interesting form of native life. At the moment nobody knows of the existence of this life-form but me. It's a mimic, Dave."

"Mimic?"

"When the spaceman known as Ted Kennedy was exploring Altair VI two years ago," Kennedy continued, "he wandered off alone, away from his ship, to look for lifeforms. There was a big brown stone in his way; he kicked it. But the stone clung to his boot. It wasn't a stone, you see. It was a mimic."

Kennedy's words made no sense. Spalding shook his head in confusion. He was close to panic. "I don't know what you're talking about, Ted. Get out of my way and let me out of this room. You—you must be out of your mind to talk this way—"

"Ted Kennedy never knew what happened to him," the other continued serenely, as though there had been no interruption. "Within ten seconds the mimic had absorbed him—swallowed him up, flesh, brain, memories, and all. When the mimic had fed, it realized what a lucky find it had made. A spaceman—who would be going back to Earth some day. The mimic can divide itself infinitely, you see. It left part of itself there, in its old disguise as a stone, waiting for unwary beasts to come along and be absorbed. The rest of itself went back to the spaceship—wearing the disguise of Ted Kennedy."

"Marge *said* you were different—that something had happened to you—"

"I have all of Ted Kennedy's memories. So far as anyone can tell, I *am* Ted Kennedy, down to the last molecule. And my crewmates, who were all absorbed by the mimic and who are all here on Earth, enjoying ground leave, now—"

Spalding shuddered. "No! You mean—there's a whole ship full of you on Earth now—all over—"

"Exactly. Come here, Dave."

"No! Get away from me."

"Come here, Dave!"

Spalding backed away, but Kennedy advanced toward him, his eyes gleaming, his hands reaching out. Spalding felt the cold fingers seize his shoulders with a burning grasp. Felt himself being drawn closer, closer, to the body of the thing that wore the guise of his

brother-in-law. Felt the framework of his soul giving way, felt himself being pulled apart, demolished, absorbed—

He fought to free himself. But every move he made only increased the destruction.

"Don't try to resist," Kennedy murmured. "It'll just take a few seconds, Dave."

In a muffled, indistinct voice, Spalding cried, "Marge! Marge, help me!"

"Just a moment more," Kennedy whispered calmly. "Don't waste your breath. She can't hear you, anyway. Just a moment more, then it will be over."

Spalding felt himself growing limp. He had no will of his own remaining. His mind and body were fusing with that of the creature from Altair VI. He was being swept away on the tide.

"Marge…." he whimpered. "Marge…."

The Kennedy-thing laughed exultantly. "There! Finished!"

He released Spalding. Spalding staggered back, then straightened up suddenly.

He smiled at the Kennedy-thing. The union was complete. The entity Dave Spalding had been totally absorbed, and….replaced.

* * *

Downstairs, Marge waited impatiently. Five minutes had gone by, and Dave had not yet returned. She had thought she heard the sound of a scuffle upstairs. Were Ted and Dave fighting, she wondered? What if—

Oh, no, she thought. Nothing serious could be going on up there. It was all her imagination, her feverishly overwrought imagination. But she wished Dave would hurry up down.

A moment later, she heard footsteps, and Dave appeared.

Marge looked up anxiously. "You were up there a long time. I was getting worried."

Spalding shrugged. "He hadn't gotten undressed yet when I came in. I had to wait until he took his shirt off—so I could see the scar."

Marge frowned faintly. Dave's voice—it sounded a bit hollow, and unnatural. The way—the way Ted's voice had sounded. Prickles of fear crept along her spine. She tried to calm herself.

In a level voice she said, "He had it, didn't he? The scar, I mean?"

"Of course. A big purple slash right across the side of his chest, where he got cut the time he climbed over the picket fence."

"Eh?" Marge was surprised. "He—he told you how he got that scar?"

"What? Oh, yeah, sure," Spalding said. "He told me all about it. How you and he were stealing apples years ago, and how the farmer came to chase you." Spalding laughed. "He jumped over the fence, but he cut himself going over, and you were stuck in the orchard because you couldn't get over the fence."

Marge felt cold chills racing over her skin. Uncertainly she said, "He told you—*that?"*

"Yes."

"Funny," she said. "He never would tell anyone that story. He was always so ashamed that he had left his kid sister behind when he tried to get away. He made me swear I would never tell anyone about it."

"Well," Spalding said, "he told me."

"Five years does change a man, I guess." Marge paused. Wild accusations rose up in her mind. But all this was too fantastic to consider. It made no sense.

She said, "Well, almost midnight, now. You'll be useless in the morning if you don't get some sleep now, Dave. Let's turn in."

"Just a minute, Marge," Spalding said slowly.

Marge began to tremble. Her husband's face was deathly pale, set in a strangely rigid mask. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Come here."

"I *am* here. Dave, what's—"

She took an uncertain step toward him. "No. Closer," he said. "Let me hold you in my arms."

Marge laughed hollowly. "Why get so lovey-dovey here in the living room, Dave? Let's go upstairs and—Dave? You look so strange, Dave."

"Let me hold you," he said, his voice flat, toneless, mechanical.

Marge took a step away from him, now, clenching her fists to keep herself from screaming. "Dave—your eyes! You look different! What's wrong with you, anyway? Something happened to you upstairs, I know it! What's going on in this house?"

"Let me hold you, Marge!" Spalding said, more loudly, stepping toward her. His thick, muscular arms snaked out and met behind her back, drawing her to him in a rough, choking hug.

Tendrils of force reached out, searching, probing, absorbing….

"Let go of me!" Marge yelled, writhing in his tight grasp. "You're holding me too tight, Dave! Are you drunk? That's what it is! He has some otherworld liquor upstairs, and he gave you some. Dave, I can't breathe—"

"Just one more moment, Marge," Spalding said softly. "And then you'll be one of us."

She pummeled against his chest with her fists in an impotent attempt at freeing herself. But he held her tight, feeding on her, consuming the substance of Marge Spalding and transforming it.

"Dave, what are you doing to me?" she whimpered. "Dave, I don't understand this. Please let go. I—you're hurting me—"

"Only a moment more before absorption. Then you'll be part of us, Marge, you and me and Ted, and then soon the whole world—"

"Dave! No!"

She screamed, high, shrill, filling the entire room with her voice.

"Quiet, Marge," Spalding said.

She screamed again, louder this time—but the scream came to an abrupt halt before it had reached its peak of volume, and died away.

"That's all there is to it, you see," Spalding said gently, a few moments later, when the transformation was complete. "A few moments while our organism absorbs yours—then the split, and a new Marge Spalding appears."

The creature that had been Marge Spalding nodded. "It's very odd, isn't it? I remember everything I ever did as Marge Spalding, clear and sharp. But I'm not Marge Spalding any more, am I? I'm—something else. Part of you, Dave. And of Ted. And of all the members of the crew of Ted's ship."

"And soon everyone in the world, too. All merged into *us."*

The form of Ted Kennedy came down the stairs. The spaceman stood at the foot of the stairs, taking in the scene.

"I see it's all over. I waited to come down until you had converted her."

"We'd better sleep now," Spalding said. "Build up our energy. And then, tomorrow, every time one of us gets someone alone—"

"We convert him into *us,"* Marge said.

Kennedy nodded. "Simple. Quick. All this food waiting for us on this planet—billions of human beings we can convert. All ours!"

They gloated quietly, wordlessly for a moment. Then the doorbell chimed.

"At this hour!" the creature that had been Marge Spalding exclaimed.

"Answer it," Kennedy said.

Spalding walked toward the door and opened it. A man in his middle fifties stood there, looking abashed and uncertain about having rung the bell so late at night.

"It's Mr. Adams from next door," Spalding said.

Adams said, in an apologetic voice, "Hello there, Mr. Spalding. I know it's late at night, and I hope I'm not intruding—but I was just coming home from the movies, and as I passed by outside our house I seem to have heard screams, and I think they were coming from in

here—”

“That’s right,” Spalding said calmly. “It was my wife Marge who was screaming.”

Adams blinked. “Mrs. Spalding? But you all seem so calm now—I mean, I guess everything’s under control—”

“Yes. Everything is under control,” Spalding said quietly.

“If that’s the case,” Adams said, “I guess I’ll just be going along on home, then. Sorry to have bothered you. Just that I thought you might be needing help—”

“We appreciate that very much, Mr. Adams. Wouldn’t you step in for a moment?”

“Oh, but it’s late, and you say everything’s under control—”

Spalding smiled. “All the same, if you’d come inside—”

“Yes, do come in,” Marge urged. “We’ll fix you a little nightcap.”

Adams hesitated doubtfully, wavering between his desire to be a good neighbor and his wish to get home and to bed. At length he said, “Well, just for a moment. I’ve always believed in being neighborly. Guess I’ll come in, if you’re nice enough to ask me.”

“We’re glad to have you, Mr. Adams. There—don’t stand in the hall. Come on in and close the door. This is my brother-in-law, Ted Kennedy.”

“How do you do,” Adams said, as Spalding closed the door. The little man looked around, suddenly confused. “Why—you all look so grim—”

Hands reached for him. Mr. Adams uttered half a cry of surprise before Spalding’s hand tightened over his mouth. The absorption began….

There was no stopping it. Mr. Adams was absorbed and transformed.

The hunger of the mimic of Altair VI was insatiable. Today, Mr. Adams; tomorrow, the universe….